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ABSTRACT

The principal of a small rural high school in Vermont documented the amount of time spent at work over 60 days in 5 categories, including conflict and special education. A literature review revealed that researchers have paid little attention to the principal's role in special education and conflict problems. The study sought to determine how much time the principal spent in these two areas for which there is no academic requirement for certification as principal. A total of 529 work hours was divided among the 5 categories. Business matters consumed the greatest portion of time (58 percent), followed by conflict (16 percent), special education (12 percent), public relations (8 percent), and supervision (6 percent). Conflict consumed a greater percentage of time than public relations and supervision combined, and special education was the third highest consumer of time. The study concludes that changes in society have increased conflict and special education issues at schools and that the role and training of administrators should be reevaluated. (Contains 10 references.) (JPT)

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The Realities of Principalship

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Abstract

The principal of a small rural high school in Vermont spent 60 days documenting the amount of time spent at work in five different categories which included conflict and special education. The object of the study was to determine how much time is consumed in these two fields for which there is no academic requirement for certification as principal.

The total amount of work performed (529 hours) was divided among five categories. The results revealed that business consumed the greatest amount of time (58%) followed by conflict (16%), special education (12%), public relations (8%), and supervision (6%). Conflict accounted for more time than public relations and supervision combined. Special education ranked third after business and conflict.

The conclusion is that changes in society have increased conflict and special education issues at school and that the role and training of the administrator should be reevaluated in light of these changes.

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Introduction

This report focuses on conflict management and special education in the routine performance of a high school principal. The study was undertaken to determine just how much time is actually spent on these two areas in comparison with all other work performed on a daily basis. As a time study, this report is unique because it targets two areas which are not included within the scope of required academic training for certification as principal in Vermont.

A sampling of the literature on educational administration and supervision also reveals the lack of attention devoted to special education and conflict. Most of the books do not even mention either area of study. One book (Roe 1980) includes a chapter entitled, "Provisions for the Exceptional Student." It only touches on the subject in general terms. Another book (Wilson 1966) devotes only five pages to special education out of a total of 853 pages. One other book (Wiles 1980) includes a chapter on "Helping Teachers Work With Special Needs Students." This too is general and only touches the surface. There are many books readily available in special education to help the administrator, but without rudimentary knowledge of the field, they are of little value.

In academic courses conflict surfaces in discussions about hiring and firing personnel and in negotiating with teachers about grievances or those pending. In the literature, conflict is virtually nonexistent. Where present it tends to deal with conflicts that arise between traditional public school operations and changes in society (Milstein 1980). There is one outstanding book on conflict (Mauer 1991) that should be required reading for all budding administrators.

The only limiting factor of this study is duration. It was written as a semester project for a two credit graduate course so the timeframe is restricted to the first three months of the school year, August 25 through November 24, 1993 (a total of 60 school days). This left two weeks for statistical analyses, interpretation, conclusions, and final draft.

Background

This study was conducted at Poultney High School, a small rural school located in west central Vermont adjacent to the New York border. The structure of the school is typical. It is staffed by the principal, one athletic director, one guidance counselor, one librarian, and one nurse. The faculty consists of nineteen full time teachers, five part time teachers, five teacher aides, two part time aides, and two tutors.

The high school includes grades seven through twelve with students entering from three feeder elementary schools within the district and one school outside the district. As of September 1, 1993 the total high school student enrollment was 292.

Timing

All sessions recorded in the daily log were rounded off to the closest five minute interval. For example, if a session ended at 9:22 it was recorded as having ended at 9:20 with the following session beginning at 9:20.

All business of a personal nature was recorded but deducted from the total hours logged for that day. For example, if a nine hour day included a twenty minute uninterrupted lunch and a ten minute personal phone call, the total time worked for that day was recorded as eight and a half hours.

Travel time was also excluded from the daily log. Evening and Saturday presence at school began upon entering the building and ended when departing the building. The same practice was followed for attendance at out of town conferences. The times and categories logged for Saturdays were added to the total accumulated on the preceding Friday for that week. Saturdays were not included in the 60 day study period.

Categories

The five categories used in this study are based solely on the author's perception of the division of the principal's workday. At the outset six categories were identified with the provision that they might be changed during documentation should they prove to be overlapping or insignificant. After logging a total of 339 hours on October 20, with only two hours devoted to budget, the two hours were transferred to business and the budget category was dropped. The other categories remained unchanged: business, conflict, special education, public relations, and supervision.

Business

This category is viewed both inside and outside the profession as the normal daily routine work of the principal. It constitutes the core of the workday because it involves the unavoidable tasks which allow the school to function as a total entity from day to day. The principal's presence and participation in business makes it known throughout the school that the main office is fully operational. Business was the one category in which the principal was engaged every day of the study and it was the one category which consumed most of the principal's time (Figure 1).

Desk work is the basis for routine business. This

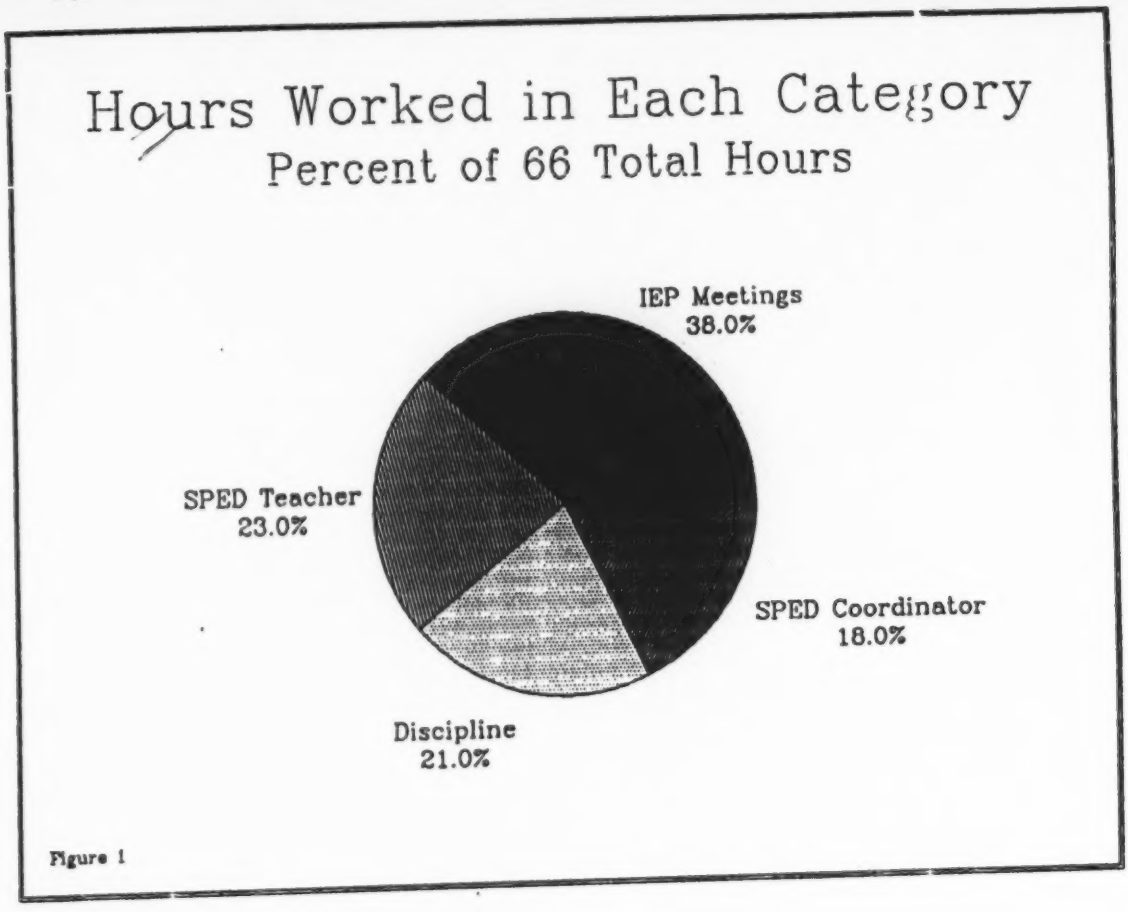

Figure 1

IEP Meetings	25 hours
SPED Teacher	15 hours
Discipline	14 hours
SPED Coordinator	12 hours

involves reading correspondence, writing letters and memos, telephone conversations, arranging meetings, and scheduling building activities. Other business conducted directly from the office includes coordinating functions with feeder elementary schools and the vocational center, liaison with local colleges for student teachers and graduate programs for teachers, communications with the school bus contractor, reviewing budgets, and signing purchase orders. Also included are the ongoing tasks of assessing current and projecting future needs for faculty, staff and curriculum.

Office time is used for private discussions with students, teachers, parents, staff, district personnel, union representatives, PTO members, and visitors. An open door policy is maintained with students, teachers and parents taking priority.

Other business conducted outside the offices includes greeting students and teachers, walking the halls, checking classrooms, monitoring students changing classes, and on the spot counselling of students about behavior. It also includes attending meetings within the building, at the district office, at the elementary schools, and at monthly school board meetings. Fire drills are monitored inside and outside the building to ensure orderly evacuation.

Conflict

Only business exceeded the amount of time the principal spent on conflict. This category does not include conflicts that involved students receiving special services. These are included in the special education category.

Conflict resolution and management involves the principal directly with parents and all levels of personnel in the building. It includes conflicts or disputes among teachers, among students and among support staff. Also included are conflicts between teachers and students, between students and their parents, between students and bus drivers, between students and vocational personnel, between teachers and support staff, and between teachers and parents. Some of these conflicts originate in the community and have nothing do do with school but they are aired at school.

Conflicts between students and their parents, guardians or foster parents may necessitate locating students with unexcused absences or actually making unannounced home visits. It may also require having parents come to school for conferences to advise them of the counselling services available to help deal with their children.

Initiatives to investigate suspected conflicts

prompted by peculiar behavioral conduct are brought directly to the attention of the principal who, alone, takes the responsibility of making impromptu judgment calls.

In addition to these, the principal is also responsible for implementing Act 51, drug and alcohol intervention, which did not occur during this study.

Special Education

Special Education was the third most time consuming category in this study. With 66 hours, 12% of the principal's time was devoted to this category. However, in terms of daily frequency it was exceeded only by business (Table 1).

As the number of students receiving special services increases each year so does the principal's role in identifying eligibility and delivering these services. There are three federal and state mandated programs to accommodate students with learning difficulties: Act 230, Special Education and Section 504. In addition to these there is a state mandated Basic Staffing Team (BST) chaired by the principal. The BST function is twofold: it serves as an advisory body to ensure that the programs are fully functional and following prescribed guidelines and it serves as a court of last resort in decision making if no consensus in regard to eligibility and/or

Table 1

Daily Frequency of Categories

(at least one session)

Business	60 days
Special Education	45 days
Conflict	40 days
Public Relations	29 days
Supervision	23 days
Period of Study	60 days

accommodations can be arrived at in committee.

Act 230 is a state program designed to provide screening for referrals to special education and to provide accommodations in the regular classroom for students who have learning problems but do not qualify for special education. The principal is one of the three core members of the eight member Act 230 TEAM (Teachers Education Assessment Managers). Anyone who feels that a student is having problems with learning may send a referral to the Act 230 TEAM. The referral is investigated and the TEAM decides on it's disposition. Nearly all referrals for special education originate in this body.

When a referral for special education is made it must be approved by the principal and the district special education coordinator before it is delivered to the special education department. At the first meeting with parents of the student identified in the referral, the BST is present. After the student is tested, observed and a decision on eligibility is made, another meeting with parents takes place and the BST Is present. At all of the meetings, including those from initial referral to Act 230, the parents may be accompanied by attorneys, psychologists, physicians, social workers, child advocates, or anyone they feel will support their

cause. This makes it important for the principal, as highest authority at the school, to be present in the event that controversies or confrontations arise or judgment calls are necessary. The discipline of special education students is ongoing but because of their status, all cases are referred to the principal for adjudication and counseling.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applies to students who have physical or mental difficulties with learning and it requires that they be accommodated in the regular classroom. The Act itself designates the principal as Section 504 coordinator and chair of the 504 Team.

Public Relations

Public relations ranked in fourth place among the five categories in this study. It consumed 42 hours (8%) of the 529 hour work total.

Since voters make or break school budgets, it is of vital importance that the principal presents a positive image of the school to the community. Many or even a majority of those who vote have no children attending school so they know only what they read or hear from others. The most effective ways to project this image are through the printed media and the principal's presence at school and community events.

The public relations category includes providing information about students, teachers and activities to the local press. It entails being present at athletic events and after school activities, especially those to which the community is invited. It requires cooperation with and participation in the PTO so that parents will spread the news and it includes attending community events that have nothing to do with the school. On November 10 the principal attended the funeral of a former student in a nearby community. The principal also represents the school at state and regional educational conferences.

Supervision

Supervision was the one category to which the least amount of time was devoted. It consumed only 29 hours (6%) of all the work done by the principal who is a practioner of teacher empowerment.

This category is characterized by the principal's status as chief executive, manager, supervisor, or commanding officer of the school. It is an employer-employee relationship in which the principal exercises ultimate authority over people in the building and on the school grounds. It is the exercise of this authority that sets the atmosphere of the school and the level of morale among those in the building.

The primary goal of supervision is to ensure that everything is in place and that the school is operating in proper order. The focus of this task is to see that each employee in the building is doing the job and earning the salary for which each was hired. This is accomplished by working with teachers to establish common goals for the school, liaison with departments to evaluate curriculum and coordinating cooperative teaming by the faculty. It also includes targeting weaknesses in the system and arranging in-services and workshops to strengthen these weaknesses. Facilitating increased learning experiences through conferences and on site graduate courses is an important part of this process.

Performing annual faculty and staff evaluations and post evaluation conferences are a contractual part of the job. Personnel supervision extends beyond the faculty and staff to encompass other professionals (athletic director, guidance counselor, nurse and librarian), teacher aides, tutors, and student teachers.

Checking weekly lesson plans and helping teachers solve logistical problems are ongoing tasks.

Interviewing candidates for teaching positions and making recommendations to the superintendent and school board and important aspects of this category.

Work Cycle

The time of year chosen for a study of this nature influences the distribution of work categories. The three months for this study occurred during the fall when annual teacher and staff evaluations took place. This means that more time was spent on supervision than would normally occur during a later three month period.

If this study had been conducted during January, February and March, the reduced time spent on supervision would be more than compensated for by work on the school budget. Public relations would also increase with information disseminated to solicit voter approval for passage of the budget.

If the study had been conducted in March, April and May, the amount of time spent on business would increase with work on scheduling classes and students for the next year and time spent on sixth grade work for incoming high schoolers. Public relations would also increase with news about graduation, awards and seniors accepted for study at colleges and universities. These would consume all the time freed up from less work on the budget and supervision.

The business category would also change with time in the nature of work. At the beginning of the school year a lot of time is spent walking the halls, checking

classroom and monitoring students changing classes. This is done to effectively deal with discipline spontaneously on the spot at the start of school. The result is that discipline problems die down quickly and subside for the remainder of the year allowing the principal to spend more time on other matters.

The only exceptions to this cycle are conflict and special education. Throughout the entire year they persist in demanding major portions or the high school principal's workday.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the principal spent nearly one third of the total daily work routine on conflict and special education. These two categories combined were exceeded only by the business category with conflict ranking second and special education third. Conflict alone consumed more time than both public relations and supervision combined. Time spent on special education was more than was devoted to either public relations or supervision. Although academic training proved to be invaluable for the three categories which consumed two thirds of the principal's time, one third was not addressed in college.

There is much in the literature and the media about the demise of the traditional family, the growing

number of students from single parent homes and the changing role of public schools which are adding custodial care to their function as institutions of learning. Even teacher training programs are being reevaluated in light of these trends. According to this study, the time is also ripe to reexamine the changing role of the administrator.

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